

A Cross-Cultural Perspective on the Interactive Mechanisms Between Social Structures and Gender Inequality

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Abstract. The matter of gender equality has grown to become a major concern around the world. Nevertheless, there is still gender inequality, although it is expressed in various cultural and social systems. This article examines the multiple and tied determinants of gender inequality and focuses on the presence of social organization, cultural construct and institutional patterns. It uses a multi-dimensional method to review the case studies in Northern Europe, South Asia, and Africa to illustrate how gender hierarchies are maintained in diverse ways. The study shows that the inclusive policy of Nordic countries has reached steps in terms of gender equality, South Asian societies grapple with the concept of patriarchy, and matrilineal societies of Africa provide alternative gender models that become more and more endangered. Literature is also used in reinforcing as well as criticizing the inequalities of genders. The paper has highlighted the necessity of culturally and institutionally sensitive intervention to counter gender disparity, and supports the significance of cross-cultural sensitivity in the formulation of gender equality policies. However, the study is constrained by the fact that it is based on a few regions, and future researchers can develop the geographical coverage to a wider scope of cultural environments to gain a more comprehensive perspective on gender inequality in the world.

Keywords: Gender inequality, social structures, cross-regional comparison, cultural narratives

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, gender equality has become a topic of widespread concern in the global society, and international documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have continuously urged governments to respond at the legal and policy levels [1]. However, despite certain achievements, gender inequality is still prevalent around the world and presents diverse and complex manifestations in different cultures and social structures. Gender gaps between countries and regions in terms of political participation, economic opportunities, education and health are still significant. In other words, gender inequality is not the result of a single factor, but the product of the interweaving of social structure, cultural concepts and institutional arrangements.

Not only do social structures constitute the division and functions of those gender roles, but they also maintain and further enhance gender inequality through institutional tools namely education systems, legal framework, and family organization. Most societies have structures that do not allow women to take part in the high-level political and economic decision making. Although such

exclusion can be defended by arguments concerning the traditional culture or social practice, the root cause of such exclusion has been structural exclusion and unequal power dynamics. The paper will utilize an inter-dimensional approach to analysis involving theoretical framework, cross-regional comparative analysis and a literary interpretation in uncovering mechanisms through which gender inequality is generated and reproduced. The study aims to uncover the interactive rationality of institutional setting and gender hierarchies by studying the representative social structures and cultural contexts in various parts of the world like Northern Europe, South Asia and Africa. In the end, the objective of the research paper is to provide a better understanding of gender issues in academic discourse, as well as emphasize the relevance of structural and cultural differences in establishing gender equality policies.

2. Theoretical frameworks on gender inequality

The development of a theoretical view of the structural causes of gender inequality must have a multi dimensional approach. Structural functionalism focuses on the functional distinction of gender roles and considers the division as a key to the functioning and continuity of society. The instrument and expressive roles theory by Talcott Parsons adheres to a traditional division of roles between men and women making them serve the public aims filled roles and emotional expressive roles respectively, thereby not discrediting the conventional institutionalized gender roles [2]. This view however tends to ignore the fact that there is always power imbalance and institutional injustices inherent in such divisions. The idea of women being systematically restricted to the sphere of the private is created by the very institutions in the majority of the Asian and Middle Eastern societies; cultural, legal, and religious. Conversely, the critical theory is concerned with historical and ideological reproduction of power association and reveals how hegemonic ideologies of gender are naturalized in institutions (law, education and media). R. W. The notion of hegemonic masculinity formulated by Connell describes to a certain degree that characteristics of heterosexual, dominant, and rational masculinity are institutionalized as normal, whereas other forms of gender articulation are stigmatized [3]. The feminist institutional analysis also demonstrates how even the ostensibly neutral law and policy apparatus tend to perpetuate male-centred logics. Kimberlee Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, which broadens the study and covers the issues of inequality between gender and race, as well as between gender and classes, religion, and other identity dimensions [4]. The work of Crenshaw sheds light on the particular weaknesses of the women of color, their experiences, in the methods of single-axis gender analysis, tend to be invisible. The opportunities and the rights of women in such countries like India or the United States, in their turn, are influenced both by such aspects as caste, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Collectively, these theoretical frameworks provide a strong platform to be used in analyzing the institutionalization of gender inequality as well as imply the need to have culturally intuitive and structurally conscious intervention of policies to achieve substantive gender justice.

3. Cross-cultural case study: the impact of social structures on gender inequality

3.1. Gender equality in Nordic countries

Nordic countries, especially Sweden, Norway and Finland, are widely regarded as models of global gender equality. These countries have built a highly inclusive gender structure through systematic social policies, reflecting the close connection between social structure and gender equality [5]. Taking Sweden as an example, it has been promoting the "socialization of housework" reform since the 1970s [6]. By implementing maternity leave, parental leave and universal childcare services, it has greatly reduced the constraints of traditional gender role division on women. Nordic countries generally implement the "daddy quota system", which stipulates that part of the parental leave must

be borne by the father, otherwise it will be invalid. This policy not only encourages men to participate in family care, but also challenges the traditional monopoly of men as the "economic pillar". According to OECD data, the proportion of Swedish men using parental leave has exceeded 30%, significantly higher than the global average [7]. At the political level, Nordic countries use quotas to promote women's participation in politics. This high level of gender representation has led to the introduction of more policies to protect women's rights, forming a positive feedback loop. The key to the success of the Nordic model is to embed gender equality into the social structure through institutional design, rather than relying solely on cultural propaganda. This case shows that structural institutional intervention can effectively break the rigidity of gender roles and achieve the reconstruction of gender power relations.

3.2. The intersection of patriarchy and religious culture in South Asian societies

South Asian countries, especially India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, generally have a deep patriarchal culture and religious authority structure [8]. These social factors have jointly shaped the marginal status of women in institutions and daily life. In India, the caste system is closely intertwined with Hindu culture, strengthening the hierarchical control over women. For example, women of different castes are treated extremely unequally in marriage choices, educational opportunities, and labor participation. Even in urban areas, the employment rate of women is still significantly lower than that of men, and they are often concentrated in informal and low-income jobs. Religious practice also plays an amplifying role in the system. Some Islamic or Hindu communities use "chastity" and "obedience" as core norms to discipline women's behavior through family structure, marriage system, and even clothing regulations. This social norm is not only maintained through intergenerational inheritance in the family, but also gains legitimacy through education, media, religious forums and other channels, constituting a structural manifestation of "cultural patriarchy".

The education system is normally discriminatory. Legislation ensures the right of women to study, and even in remote regions, the number of girls who leave schools is still great. The factors that cause gender inequality are complex and they are child marriage, economic constraints in the family and the existing belief system that, women must come first in the family. Gender inequality cannot be perceived as one kind of oppression. The lives of the women in various caste, classes, and regional groups are more complicated, especially in marriage, education and work. As an example, women in the low caste living in the rural areas face the effects of combined religious, caste-based, and economic discrimination and marginalization. These institutional inequalities are not reflected only in cultural patterns but they also are depicted in the policy gaps and underrepresentation of women in political arenas. The gendered inequality in South Asia is deeply structural and intersectional in nature.

3.3. Gender rights in matriarchal societies in Africa

In the global gender structure dominated by patriarchy, matriarchal societies in some parts of Africa provide another perspective to understand the relationship between gender and power. The Akan people in Ghana, West Africa, practice a matrilineal inheritance system, where land, property and identity are passed down through the maternal line, and women have actual decision-making power in family and community governance [8]. This social structure challenges the common assumption that "gender equity power subordination" and demonstrates the possibility of gender role diversity. In these matriarchal societies, women not only occupy a core position in the family, but in some cases can also serve as public roles such as religious ceremony hosts and local political leaders. This social structure challenges the widely held assumption of "gender equals power" and illustrates the potential for diverse gender roles. In these matriarchal societies, women occupy central roles within the family and, in some instances, also serve in public capacities such as religious ceremony leaders and local

political figures. Studies have shown that these societies perform relatively well in terms of gender-based violence rates, female literacy rates and community participation. This shows that when social structures place women at the center of resource control and discourse power, their status in the public and private domains can be significantly improved.

These traditional structures face challenges under the modern state system. With the intervention of the national legal system, market economy and religious revival, many matriarchal systems are gradually being weakened. In modern national laws, male inheritance rights are often given priority, resulting in the marginalization of the legal basis of matrilineal traditions. In addition, the modernization process of urbanization and education systems often ignores or excludes matrilineal knowledge and practices, forming new inequalities. African matrilineal society provides counterexamples and hope for gender research, but also reveals the tension between traditional and modern systems.

4. The role of institutions, culture, and literature in gender inequality

4.1. The impact of institutional and power structures on gender inequality

The configuration of institutions and power in social structures largely determines the distribution of gender roles and the depth and form of gender inequality. Institutions are not merely a collection of laws and policies; they also encompass operational norms across various social domains such as education, labor, family, and politics. When these institutions are not designed or implemented with gender sensitivity, they often serve to deepen the marginalization of women. Taking the political field as an example, although many countries recognize gender equality in their constitutions, the representation of women in parliament and government remains disproportionately low. Globally, women's representation in parliament is 27%, and it is expected to take another 39 years to achieve equality [9]. Institutional "gender neutrality" often masks structural gender barriers, such as gender bias in party nomination mechanisms and unequal access to political funds.

The family system is also a manifestation of the power structure. Many countries still regard men as the default owners of household heads and property rights, which constitutes an institutional exclusion of women in areas such as marriage, child support, and inheritance. Gender inequality is not simply a problem of ideas, but a structural problem deeply rooted in institutional design. Achieving gender equality requires starting from the institutional level, through institutional reforms such as gender quotas, family policy adjustments, gender budgets, etc., to reshape power relations and change the foundation of unequal social structures.

4.2. The mediating role of culture in gender inequality

Culture is not only a reflection of values and beliefs, but also plays the role of a "mediating mechanism" in the social structure, shaping people's cognition and expectations of gender roles. As social constructivism points out, gender is not a natural attribute, but a social identity that is constantly constructed and strengthened through cultural practices and social discourse. Culture is not neutral in this process, and often serves the existing power structure and becomes a tool to maintain gender inequality. "Traditional culture" is often used to justify social exclusion of women. In South Asia and the Middle East, women's chastity, dress codes and subordinate status are often regarded as the "essence of culture" and widely spread through religion, marriage, education and other systems. The influence of this cultural concept makes it difficult for women to escape structural oppression in real life even if they enjoy equal rights under the law.

Culture also imposes constraints on male roles, shaping men into the roles of "strong" and "dominant", which not only suppresses men's emotional expression space, but also solidifies the gender division of labor invisibly. It can be seen that culture is both a disseminator and a defender of

gender inequality. Culture itself is also dynamically changing. In recent years, with the advancement of gender equality education, media influence, and cross-cultural exchanges, traditional cultural concepts have increasingly been questioned and reshaped. In parts of Africa, for instance, the practice of female circumcision has gradually been abolished, driven by international pressure and local feminist movements. To fully comprehend the social structural causes of gender inequality, it is essential to view culture as a key mediating factor, recognizing both its repressive role and its transformative potential. Efforts must focus on supporting institutional change and fostering shifts in social consciousness.

4.3. Literary narratives and the construction of gender structures

As a mirror of culture, literature not only reflects the gender structure of society, but also participates in its construction and criticism with unique narrative strategies. Under different social backgrounds, literary works reveal the deep logic of structural inequality by portraying gender roles, presenting social norms and family relationships, and also provide space for the expression of female subjectivity. Zhang Ailing's *Love in a Fallen City* offers a poignant portrayal of the struggles faced by women in modern Chinese society [10]. Amidst the turbulence of war and societal shifts, the protagonist Bai Liusu is compelled to use marriage as a means of survival, navigating both family oppression and the rigid constraints of the marriage system. The narrative exposes the lack of autonomy and agency women experience within the traditional family structure, while also shedding light on the subtle yet powerful strategies women employ to maintain their dignity and secure their survival within these restrictive environments.

In the Western context, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on the totalitarian religious system and constructs an anti-utopian society where women are institutionally oppressed as "reproductive tools" [11]. In the novel, law, religion, and culture together constitute a control mechanism for women's bodies, thereby directly criticizing the threat of religious extremism to women's rights in reality. These literary works not only reveal how gender inequality is legitimized in social structures, but also reverse gender discourse through narrative strategies, giving voice to marginalized people and endowing them with subjectivity. From a cross-cultural comparison, whether it is Eastern family ethics or Western institutional control, literature provides a cultural text for understanding gender structure. Literary narrative is not only a carrier of gender structure, but also a critical response to institutional oppression and cultural discipline, providing us with important ideological resources and narrative power to understand the multi-layered mechanism of gender inequality.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this research has offered an insight into the complexity of the processes of production, maintenance, and disruption of gender inequality that is embedded at both institutional and cultural levels. In Nordic states, the active involvement of social policies has been effective in achieving gender equality through the reorganization of the institutional setting, and as such this illustrates how important legal framework and the state policy is in ending gender inequalities. Conversely, patriarchal and religious predispositions lead to enormous issues in the South Asian society since they not only create institutional exclusions, but also narrative representations of culture that promotes the status of the subordinate person as female to others. These results highlight the importance of cultural as well as institutional intervention in the process of addressing gender inequality. The scale of the research also indicates that the African matrilineal societies provide a unique and precious insight on gender structures that give women power, which is being threatened more by modernisation and new legal systems. Additionally, literary works to *Love in a Fallen City* and *The Handmaid's Tale*

demonstrate how gender roles and inequalities are both confirmed and debunked through narrative and this gives insight on the current struggle to achieve gender justice.

In spite of these precious lessons, this paper has some limitations. The study is also limited by the fact that it is a small sample size considering a limited number of regions and countries thus it fails to represent the entire gender experiences around the world. Subsequent studies can add to this one by enhancing the geographic study, adding more geographic and cultural contexts to acquire a more extensive view of global gender inequality.

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